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## Finding the Message of the Pope's Encyclical

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*For Environment Magazine, 14 August 2015*

**There has been much public comment on the recent Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis. Not least this has come from climate change commentators, communicators and policy advocates welcoming the Pope's engagement with the issue. In this short commentary I want to question whether this Papal intervention is really about climate change, or even about the environment more broadly. Rather, he offers a profound analysis of humanity's earthly predicament.**

The full title of the Encyclical is "*Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*". *Laudato Si'* – meaning 'Praise be to you' – is taken from a canticle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Saint Francis of Assisi. This is an appropriate source of inspiration for the Argentinian Pope who deliberately took upon himself the name of Francis, thereby drawing attention to a rich and long tradition of Catholic teaching and practice about respect for the natural world.

Many climate policy advocates have welcomed the Encyclical<sup>i</sup>, hoping that it may offer a decisive intervention from a 'person of significance' to change attitudes, behaviours and policies with regard to climate change. Such reasoning extends the series of such popular hopes for 'decisive breakthroughs' in tackling climate change which can be traced back now well over a decade. I can remember similar sentiments being voiced in 2004 when climate change first received the Hollywood treatment with the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. And they continued with Al Gore's 2006 movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 jointly to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Al Gore, with the arrival of the new 'progressive' President of the United States Barack Obama at COP15 in Copenhagen, with the award-winning novelist Ian McEwan tackling climate change in his 2010 novel *Solar* and with the hoped-for impact of Superstorm Sandy in autumn 2012 on American public opinion.

As frustration with the apparent failures of intergovernmental climate negotiations has mounted, so campaigners and advocates have sought to place their faith in a widening range of cultural interventions and moments of decision. The forthcoming international climate meeting in Paris in December, COP21, is another such moment. These, interventions, such advocates hope, will turn the tide of battle in the war against climate change. And so now the Pope.

But I am not so sure that *On Care For Our Common Home* should be seen in this way. Pope Francis is not a science communicator. Neither is he an entertainer, policy advocate or climate campaigner. And his Encyclical is not really about climate change. Yes, he talks about the 'disturbing warming of the climate system' and about potential future climatic risks. But he talks a lot more about the needs of the poor, about the Janus face of technology and about the struggle for justice, love and peace inspired by the character of God and a suffering Christ. 'Climate' is mentioned just 14 times in the 35,000 words; 'the poor', 59 times.

What is important in this Encyclical therefore is not so much the Pope's comments about the reality of (human-caused) climate change nor about limiting global warming to two degrees (in fact he says nothing about this policy goal). What is far more important is the way in which he develops an account of what it means to be human, to be made in the image of God. He is concerned first and foremost to offer a vision of human dignity, responsibility and purpose, drawing upon the rich traditions of Catholic theology and ethics.

His Encyclical offers a powerful critique not simply therefore of climate change, but of the world humans have made for themselves. It is a world driven by a pathological techno-economic paradigm and a 'deified market', in which the poor are marginalised, solidarity is undermined and greed triumphs over justice. It is in opposition to a world modelled for humanity by the person of Christ. Pope Francis offers a holistic narrative of the human condition which embraces science, but is hardly driven by it. It places concerns about the integrity of ecosystems and social justice ('planetary boundaries' and sustainable development if you will) within a much more capacious and integrated worldview. It is rooted in a cosmic reality – with both material and spiritual dimensions – and recognises the human capacity for ingenuity and propensity for greed.

What is being offered in *On Care for our Common Home* then is a powerful story - a meta-narrative – about the human condition. (This is somewhat ironic for those late-moderns who have largely abandoned their faith in grand narratives of truth and meaning, or even in their possibility). Concerns about technology, water, power, climate, slavery, biodiversity and greed are woven together into an inspirational account of divine goodness and healthy human living. It escapes the confines of a narrowly-drawn science and economics and shows the power, vitality and inspiration of a Christian worldview. It also draws attention to the centrality in the Christian faith of the idea of transformation. This is less the transformation that has become fashionable in climate change research and policy circles<sup>ii</sup>; rather is it a transformation of the human person: "For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion ... an 'ecological conversion', whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them."<sup>iii</sup>

The importance of creating meaningful stories which make sense of climate change according to motivational cultural and religious beliefs is being re-discovered by some<sup>iv</sup>.

Which simply highlights the gross misreading of what it is to be human revealed in comments made by the former Chairman of the IPCC, R K Pachauri, at the launch of the Synthesis Report of the IPCC's 5th Assessment in November 2014. Pachauri claimed that, "All we need is the will to change, which we trust will be motivated by ... an understanding of the science of climate change".

But simply 'understanding climate science' will not provide the 'will to change'. The Pope clearly recognises this, as does the Alliance of Religions and Conservation which remarked nearly a decade ago, "Without narrative, few people are ever moved to change or adapt. The faiths have been masters of this for centuries."<sup>v</sup> Interpreting climate change and the possibilities of human agency through the eyes of the world's religions offers fresh insights and different inspirations about what it means to be human in an age of climate change.

The generally laudatory reception given to the Pope's Encyclical reveals the extent to which the contemporary world has lost any sense of a guiding narrative, hope or telos. And without telos there can be no virtue. What Pope Francis has done is to draw our attention back to the important role religion can play in public life<sup>vi</sup>.

Mike Hulme, 14 August 2015

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<sup>i</sup> For example: "Pope Francis recruits Naomi Klein in climate change battle" (28 June 2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/28/pope-climate-change-naomi-klein> [Accessed 13 August 2015]; "Is climate change a moral issue? Is the Pope catholic?" (15 June 2015) <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2015/06/is-climate-change-a-moral-issue-is-the-pope-catholic/> [Accessed 13 August 2015]. See also Naomi Oreskes' Introduction in: Pope Francis (2015) *Encyclical on climate change and inequality. On care for our common home* Melville House Publishing, Brooklyn, NY, 165pp.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, Hackmann, H. and St.Clair, A.L. (2012) *Transformative cornerstones of social science research for global change* Report of the International Social Science Council, Paris, 32pp.; or Scoones, I., Leach, M. and Newell, P. (eds.) (2015) *The politics of green transformations: pathways to sustainability* Earthscan/Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 220pp.

<sup>iii</sup> Paragraph 217 in Pope Francis (2015) *Encyclical letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis – On care for our common future* Vatican Press, Rome, 184pp.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, COIN (2015) *Starting a New Conversation on Climate Change with the European Centre-Right* Climate Outreach and Information Network, Oxford, 40pp. <http://www.climateoutreach.org.uk/a-new-european-conversation/> and Callison, C. (2014) *How climate change comes to matter: the communal life of facts* Duke University Press, Padstow, Cornwall, 316pp.

<sup>v</sup> "UN and ARC launch programme with faiths on climate change" (7 December 2007) <http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=207> [Accessed 13 August 2015]

<sup>vi</sup> See also: Mendieta, E. and Vanantwerpen, J. (eds.) (2011) *The power of religion in the public sphere: Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West* Columbia University Press, New York 137pp.; and Williams, R. (2012) *Faith in the public square* Bloomsbury Press, London, 360pp.